QA38 – Allergy Test for Infants

QUESTION:

I see a 7 month-old with formula intolerance symptoms of reflux and chronic otitis media. The infant is growing well on Nutramigen, but symptoms seem to be worsening again. The family is wondering about the possibility of other allergies such as environmental or corn. How early can an infant be tested for a food or environmental allergy? Would the information be useful? Is there any information on intolerance to components in these defined formulas?

ANSWER:

Infants can be tested (with a skin test or a RAST test) for suspected food allergies. "Positive skin tests emerge in the absence of symptomatic food allergy about 60%-65% of the time (false positives)". [1] "Prick" tests (using a food extract in the concentration of 1:20) can also be useful. No specific ages are listed for the test. I have seen infants 8 or 9 months of age tested with a "prick" test and infants younger than 8 or 9 months tested with RAST testing.

An infant should be diagnosed with an actual allergy before formula is changed. A true food allergy in an infant is usually quite severe-respiratory symptoms or severe ectopic dermatitis. Reflux and otitis media are two distinct diagnoses that warrant a different type of diagnostic work up.

If this child actually has the diagnosis of reflux, he or she should be treated with reflux precautions (thickened feedings, positioning after feedings, and consideration of reflux medications) not necessarily a formula change.

Nutramigen is a formula used for milk and soy sensitivity. Nutramigen has hydrolyzed casein which is not tolerated by some milk-sensitive infants. It is not usually indicated as a treatment of reflux, although many pediatricians use it for that. The most hypoallergenic formula for infants (no intact protein - just amino acids) is Neocate.

Reference:

1) "Immediate Reactions to Foods in Infants & Children", from Metcalfe, Sampson, Simon, Food Allergy: Adverse Reactions to Foods and Food Additives, Blackwell Science, 1997.